

The Prince of Solo and the Pretty American Girl

How He Taught His Fair Visitor the Strange, Colorful Dances That Interpret the Ancient Religion of His People, Revealing Rhythmic Secrets

FEW American girls have had the opportunity of being the house guest of an Oriental prince.

Miss Estelle Bloch of New York has just returned to America bringing with her a most interesting narrative of her experiences as the guest of the Prince and Princess of Solo in the mystic old land of Java. She has brought back with her an amazing story of her acquaintanceship with many of the scores of minor wives who compose the Prince's harem.

For a year she was in Solo, living a good portion of the time among the Prince's harem women, in their quarters, where she studied their dances. That was her mission—to catch the subtle meanings of Oriental and Javanese dances and to bring them back to America with her.

Her mission is interesting because of its unusualness, and doubly so because of the experiences she had. She went to the Orient not as a tourist merely, but as a researcher. She wanted no hearsay knowledge; she wanted to learn by association—by becoming passive and trying to fit into the environments she had sought, catching the points of view and the attitudes of the people among whom she lived, becoming one among them for a time. She succeeded in that.

Her research was to prove that every gesture of the primitive dance is meaningful, and to interpret such meaning. Therefore she went to the most ancient land of the Orient, where there is still that primitive naturalness and unconventionality of the days before civilization—where there is yet apparent in the movements of the dancer some deep physical or moral significance and aesthetically executed insinuation such as seems to have been lost to those representatives of the art in cultured lands who merely sway to rhythm. The sinuous women in the harem of the Prince of Solo taught Miss Bloch the magic of their dancing. They are not mere slaves to the vibrance of the dance; their compact bodies rather are swayed by powerful and irrefragable and intense purposes and motives that find almost savage expressions in inevitable movement.

Miss Bloch had experiences that perhaps no other American girl has ever had. This Prince of a royal house of Java ordered out his favorite and most beautiful minor wives to perform before her. He allowed her to live with and have the privileges of his undisciplined harem princesses—to study their dancing and to dance with them. She lived in that portion of the palace assigned by the Prince to the most lovely and therefore the most favored of his lesser consorts, and Miss Bloch lived for almost a year as one of them in so far as her Western scruples and conventionalized circumspectness would allow.

In her life with the harem women she tried to find their motives and inspirations, and their attitudes to life as they knew it. By such methods and means she has acquired and maintained the spirit of some savage and non-understandable ritual. She lived in the atmosphere of it. She made herself submissive and passive to its influences, and she became of her own volition and with premeditated purpose a part and subject of the little gods that guide the beings of harem women.

Miss Bloch is young and beautiful. If she were not she would not have undertaken the quest, for her aim was to have her own body serve as the medium which was to bring the expressive liveness, the sinuous, meaningful movements of the Javanese charmers, back with her to America.

Harem Women Most Perfect Eastern Dancers

These harem women are the most perfect of the Eastern dancers. Java has long been noted for the grace and beauty of its dancing women, and this Prince of the royal house of Solo has chosen his scores of wives—except one—from among the dancers of the island. And he has chosen those with the most perfect bodies and the loveliest faces. Indeed, each one of them is literally a siren, and her lure is the dance. When the fame of a dancing girl becomes published by word of mouth over Java her name inevitably reaches the ears of some Prince. This Prince summons her to his palace and has her dance before him, and as she pleases his senses and emotions, as well as his eyes, then she becomes one of his wives and takes a foremost place among the beauties of his harem—or his Kraton as it is called in Java.

Her place as the foremost of the Prince's lesser wives is short lived. Another dancing girl comes and wins the fleeting favor of the ruler and his late beloved steps back into the humdrum, peaceful, unexciting life of the Kraton women.

These must share the Prince's love with the principal wife, the true Princess, who lives in another part of the palace, who is the one woman escorted publicly by the Prince and who alone can bear his successor to the throne. The children of the harem women take up the professions of their mothers. Almost invariably the children born in the harem are trained to be dancers. It is therefore brought about that most of the dancing women of Java are themselves of royal blood, daughters of princes of the various regions.

Miss Bloch has succeeded admirably in catching the charming motives of the harem dancer. The fact is that she had the unparalleled experience of having been practically taught to dance by the Prince of Solo. He superintended her instruction.

tion. He brought out his most gracefully expressive and most powerfully effective dancing girls and had them dance for Miss Bloch's edification.

At the Travel Show last month she danced for artists of Holland and France and America, who agreed that she had caught the elusive nuances hitherto unknown to Occidental dancers.

In all parts of the Orient Miss Bloch found and mastered new qualities of the dance. She insists, however, that she found the most enchanting possibilities and acquired the greatest part of her new knowledge and ability to express emotions and passions and temptations in the dance while she lived among the harem queens of Prince Mangkoe Ngoroko of Solo.

Soon after she arrived in his palace the Prince had one of the most graceful of his minor

Above—Mata Hari, the one time Javanese Temple girl, who became the popular beauty of Paris and who was executed during the war as a spy.

To right—ancient stone image of dancing girl.

wives—one of his lasting favorites—dance for her the various phases of the Perfume Dance and most ancient of the marriage customs of a most ancient land, and before Miss Bloch had left Java she too had become master of the fleeting qualities of frivolity, sincerity, shallow emotion and deep passion which combine to make its overwhelming effectiveness.

This dance—the Dance of the Five Perfumes—is a marriage custom of Javanese royalty that is thousands of years old.

It is a testing dance. The prospective bride of a prince of the royal house must be submitted to the "fragrances of powerful perfumes" and must withstand the four insidious ones before the marriage can be consummated.

First the bride must prove her worthiness to be a consort of a royal prince by submitting to the tests of the spell casting fragrances suggested by the characters of four insidious assailants: Vanity, Coquetry, Envy and Hate, and by repulsing them. And if she withstands these four, the test of Love is danced, to which she must yield if she is to be proved to have such qualities as to be deserving of a prince's love.

First, Vanity casts her spell, and the suggestion is of all that is shallow and futile and garish. Then Coquetry weaves her web of nuance and subtle invitation to the bride. Envy then assails her and after that dance is done comes the spiteful attack of the embodiment of Hate. If she has stood strong and untampered under the stratagems and violent assaults of these, then Love dances her deep passion before the tense emotions of the bride, and if Love conquers where the four less admirable embodiments have failed, then the watching woman is deemed fit and ready to go to the charms of her prince.

This dance Miss Bloch learned in its entirety and in its depth, and she has

danced it to the amazement and wonderment of artists and critics of Occidental lands.

Clear in Miss Bloch's memory are the events of her first night in the palace of the Prince of Solo. She had already spent much of a year in Japan, China and India in her effort to catch the intangible significance of the intimate features of the oldest of ceremonies. In none of these countries had she been received into the harem. Naturally she was thrilled and afraid when the Prince of Solo welcomed her with considerable warmth and offered her the freedom of all the Kraton.

It is amazing that she had the courage to undertake what she calls her mission in the Orient. Miss Bloch is the acme of femininity, slight and slender and dark and young—scarcely twenty—and yet she has shown the high courage of an adventurer, of a swashbuckler in miles and fearful situations.

Java Still Land of Remarkable Anachronisms

Java is a land of remarkable anachronisms. It has electric lights and railways and motor cars, but its people and its customs are unchanged after hundreds and hundreds of years. The same caste feelings and the same contentment in their patriarchal systems that the Javanese must have had before the first hint of the development of a Western civilization still prevail.

Miss Bloch was met at the Solo railway station by one of the automobiles of the Prince's fleet and driven over perfect roads to the palace inclosure. Then she was taken directly to the royal guest house—where she took all her meals during her stay at the palace, although she lived in the Kraton—and there a suite was assigned to her for the night and she was left to bathe, rest and dress for dinner.

Dinner was in the dining room of the

guest house, and there she met the Prince and his Princess—the principal wife, whose son alone can achieve his father's throne. The explanation of Miss Bloch's dining always in the guest house is a religious one. It was necessitated by rules governing his religion, which, though nominally Mohammedan, has only a thin veneer of that faith's tenets over the ancient Hindu rites, legends and traditions which have belonged to the islands for many centuries.

Early in the evening Miss Bloch was taken across the courtyard into the festival hall. The Prince was there to welcome her, and he stood and came forward. Miss Bloch says she had the presence of mind to salaam in the fashion of greeting of the East. Because he was pleased with this the Prince shook hands with her.

Then he presented Miss Bloch to the Princess—the one official wife—who impressed her as being very beautiful and charming. She was not a dancing girl as the harem inmates were, but a daughter of a neighboring potentate.

The Prince and his Princess wore the native sarong—a long strip of batik material wrapped around the lower part of the body. The designs of these sarongs are significant of caste. Accordingly the design for the royal family is the most gorgeous in quality and color of any in the land. The Prince wore a loose fitting satin jacket above the sarong; the Princess wore a similar one, but hers was as it molded to her body, bringing out the full, beautiful lines and curves to splendid advantage. She wore many large and perfect diamonds. Her head was bare and her glistening black hair was arranged in a simple coil. The Prince's head was covered by a "kepala," an exquisite turban, fitting closely.

On one side of the festival hall the orchestra was arrayed. On the other were

about seventy of the Prince's minor wives—members of the Kraton, with which Miss Bloch was later to become so familiar. The harems of some of the Javanese princes have literally hundreds of members. Once a woman enters the Kraton she never leaves it until death, and so there are many old, worn and ugly women who serve neither the pleasure of their master nor any arduous duty in the upkeep of the Prince's immediate domain. A strange and interesting fact is that an ascendant prince inherits his father's harem and must support it in addition to his own, which he begins to choose with women who please his fancy as soon as he becomes a monarch.

Each new inmate of the harem, who may be anywhere from 14 to 17 years old, is married to the Prince by a most elaborate ceremony. But this ceremony fades away to insignificance in comparison to the marriage service by which he is wedded to the official Princess.

Soon after Miss Bloch's arrival at the palace the Prince arranged a celebration for her benefit.

Remained in the Palace

To Learn Temple Dances

Although it was arranged for her pleasure and instruction, hundreds of people came from all neighboring towns and communities. The pavilion was lighted electrically that night, but the people came with torches and stood outside to watch the dancing. And the dances were wonderful—the light, and the gleaming colors of the scanty costumes draped about the voluptuous bodies of beautiful women.

Miss Bloch knew at once that she had found the dances she wanted to learn and to bring back to America with her. The dances were impressive with meaning. In their movements and giddings were eloquent love makings and in their various moods bespeakings of all the passions, of religious worship, of lust and purity.

Miss Bloch obtained the Prince's permission to remain in the palace to study the dances. He even urged it, and afterward took personal interest in her progress. He was her critic and she danced her interpretations of the dances of his own harem women before him. He approved, or criticized as he himself was given reaction to her efforts.

Each morning she attended the classes

given by the master of the dance—all dancers practice an hour every day. From the time they are very tiny the children are trained, but the training is as natural as learning to speak, for the dance as it lives in Java is as natural and almost as articulate as is the power of speech. There is no hardship in the lessons given the children such as attend the toe dancing contortions and the pure gymnastics of Europe and America.

Every posture and every gesture of the Javanese dancer has a definite meaning. Often this meaning is significantly attached to the ancient religious legends, legends descendant from the day when their religion was in all its ceremony the worship of the flesh. The slight influence of the Mohammedan faith on these dances has been rather a curious one. Long ago the ancestors were looked upon as gods by the Javanese, and the dancers represented them undisguised. But the coming of the Mohammedans changed this. They pointed out that the gods were more than mortal and were accordingly not to be represented by man in the naked flesh and feature. They decreed that any dancer in the figure of a god must wear a mask.

That is the likely origin of mask dancing. The Javanese have made no effort to make an art of it and that is why it is an art. The rule is now a tradition. It is strictly observed, but the ages have made no other change.

Miss Bloch was asked whether she really was happy in Java and in her association with the harem women.

"If I could fit into the caste life there I think I should love to make it my home," she replied, "accepting all their customs as my own; but that could never be, of course, since I have been inoculated with the malignant germ of our civilization—the germ of ambition."

"But polygamy?" she was asked—"surely you disapprove of polygamy?"

"Indeed I do not," she answered. "I distinctly approve of polygamy in a polygamous country. To be anything other than a man's one and only love here in America is unthinkable to a woman. But in a world where custom and tradition have nurtured a different scheme of things and sanction polygamy, I think polygamy is all right."

"To be one of 200 or 400 wives does sound awful, unless you stop to consider and realize that each wife is treated as a very precious possession. The wives of a harem have many servants; they are beautifully clothed; they have wonderful jewels, and fine carriages. They are free from all responsibility and have nothing to worry about."



One of the Prince's slave girl dancers. At left—a male Temple dancer.